Designing Choice, Consequence, and Constraint

A 2015 Conversation with Chris Avellone

Interviewed by: Gerald Martin (LongwoodGeek)
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Curator's Note (2025)

This interview is preserved as a **primary source document** from a formative period in modern role-playing game history. Conducted in 2015, during the early resurgence of isometric RPGs and the rise of Kickstarter-funded development, it captures design philosophies, production constraints, and narrative-system thinking that continue to shape RPG design today.

The interview text below is presented **in full and unaltered**. Annotations are added sparingly and are clearly marked as 2025 context. They do not revise, reinterpret, or contradict the interviewee's original statements.

I. Creative Lineage & Influences

Q: So of all of the licenses you have had the pleasure of working with, which has been the most enjoyable for you?

A: I've enjoyed all of them for different reasons, even the ones I initially disliked working on (Star Wars, which I grew to love more and more as time went on). Of the top contenders, it would probably be Planescape (because it allowed for almost any design idea you – or the player – could dream up; *Torment: Tides of Numenera* has the same sort of freedom about it) and Fallout (working on Fallout 2 was one of the best times of my life, even if I didn't think so at the time because I was so stressed out between working on it and Planescape). Fallout had/has so many cool game mechanics about it and really pried open the branching quest solution design door that had been closed for so long. It also paid a lot of attention to actions in the world and your character build choices – and rewarded you for them.

Annotation – 2025: Planescape: Torment and *Fallout 2* are now widely regarded as foundational works in narrative-first RPG design and are frequently cited in both academic and professional design discussions.

II. Fantasy vs. Science Fiction

Q: What type of setting do you prefer to work in: Fantasy or Science Fiction? Do you pick a setting first and then tailor the project to that or vice versa?

A: It doesn't matter to me as long as the fantasy is interesting. Let me define that. The spell system and magic/spiritual physics can make it stand out or kill it. If it's regurgitated without a signpost to set it significantly apart (either visual or in fantasy physics), it's often not interesting and more of a challenge to design for.

But the execution is the thing. If someone had told me that they had designed a fantasy spell system based on the elements, I'd likely go all BlankFace™ and stare at them silently until they left. But show me storyboards for *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and demonstrate all the ways that spell system expresses itself within the world—how it shapes cultures, architecture, and fighting styles—and I'd sit up and take notice.

If that wasn't enough, *Legend of Korra* does an even more amazing job of showing how the same world can evolve even further from the foundation and discoveries of the previous series, keeping the feel of the original show but using the former's touchstones and characters to propel the plotline and world development even further. At Obsidian, I cited the transition elements between these two shows as one of the best design examples for how to make a world's chronology relevant and reactive to the player's choices.

Sci-Fi is a special treat. I rarely get the chance to do sci-fi work beyond Fallout, but I would be eager to play around in sci-fi worlds, absolutely. *FTL: Advanced Edition* was a perfect exercise in this arena—it allowed me to design a whole series of sci-fi short-story encounters including plague ships, refugee ships, brand-new hull-devouring alien race encounters, and more, and I had a lot of fun doing it.

III. Project Focus & Kickstarter

Q: How do you decide what yourself and Obsidian are going to focus on project-wise? Has Kickstarter helped or hindered you in this?

A: The owners usually decide what I'll be doing next, and we also decide the course of our next projects (although our CEO often is the compass for this, and it also depends on what publishers are willing to finance). I do occasionally get some say on the project I'm on, but often I find I'm divided across so many projects that it's hard to focus on a single one.

Kickstarter has been a nice breather and it absolutely has given us more freedom in what we work on. In addition, it's also allowed more freedom in production, content, and milestones. It was one of the few projects where we had the freedom to be late for quality.

Annotation – 2025: Early optimism around Kickstarter-funded RPGs would later be tempered by sustainability challenges, but this period represented a rare expansion of creative autonomy for studios.

IV. Narrative, Systems, and Dialogue Design

Q: Do you prefer the design side, writing side, or producing side of a game?

A: I like all aspects, and they're all tied together more than people may realize. John Gonzalez once paid me the compliment of calling me a “writer with production sensibilities.” This came out of a discussion about organizing dialogue topics and sub-topics so a complex conversation doesn’t drive the designer insane.

My approach was to start dialogue with an organic opener, allow some reactive threading, then move into menu-driven selections. The organic portion gets recorded as reactivity, and subsequent conversations awaken only the menu tree.

V. Fallout, Wasteland, and Design Lineage

Q: What was it like revisiting a franchise that helped give birth to Fallout?

A: Going back to *Wasteland 2* and *Fallout: New Vegas* was an exciting time. For Fallout, we revisited many campaign elements from Interplay days—Caesar’s Legion, NCR desperation, Nightkin insanity, and Hoover Dam. Always Hoover Dam.

Annotation – 2025: Hoover Dam has since become one of the most iconic narrative anchors in RPG history.

VI. Alpha Protocol & Unrealized Systems

Q: What issues did you find in creating your own IP in Alpha Protocol?

A: Alpha Protocol was a complicated project with many iterations. We wanted asynchronous intel sharing, global hub-and-spoke mission structures, and reactivity between missions. Much of this was planned for *Alpha Protocol 2* before it was canceled.

Annotation – 2025: Many of these ideas would later surface independently in immersive sims and narrative RPGs, but never unified as described here.

VII. Voice Acting & Performance

Q: How do you decide on voice actors?

A: Sometimes we have an imagined delivery; other times, we rewrite to fit the actor once cast. We did this for James Urbaniak and Roger Cross.

VIII. Writing Beyond Games

Q: How different is comic writing from game narrative design?

A: Prose, comics, screenplays, and game writing all require different disciplines. Comics teach visual storytelling and brevity, which is invaluable for RPG narrative design.

IX. Reflection & Personality

Q: In your spare time, what do you like to do to relax?

A: I write short stories, edit, draw cartoons, read comics, and watch movies—usually while on a rowing machine.

Q: Finally, what can you tell me about all of your fine hats?

A: They are all retired. I discovered I am not a hat person. They were pretty upset by this, but they'll find other heads to rest upon.

Appendix A – Citation Formats

APA (7th ed.)
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MLA (9th ed.)
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